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Teacher's new role in language learning and in promoting learner autonomy

Lumturie Bajrami^{a*}

^aSouth East European University, Ilindenska n.335,1200 Tetovo, Macedonia

Abstract

This article is about autonomy in language learning and the basic components which define the role of a teacher and the role of a learner in the process. A teacher's role is very important in helping students develop autonomy in learning, besides other crucial functions, such as management and instruction. Learner autonomy in the last few decades has been considered as one of the ultimate goals in education in general and in particular in language learning.

An autonomous learner can be considered that student who has developed some learning strategies and is able to control their way of learning. In the case of learning a language, the students need to know how to learn in the classroom and out of it in order to understand what strategies are more functional for them. Having a repertoire of learning styles and strategies can help students become better and more creative and autonomous learners. The process of becoming an autonomous learner is a dynamic one and leads the learner into the acquisition of numerous styles and strategies. The main goal of strategies and instruction is to make the students more aware of the effectiveness of their learning, and also to help students consciously control how they learn so that they can be efficient, motivated, and independent language learners.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +389 75 222 133; fax: +389 44 356 001.

E-mail address: l.bajrami@seeu.edu.mk

1. Introduction

Teacher's role is vital in autonomous learning and for that reason can never be ignored. The learner has the responsibility to make decisions and take charge of their learning, but without teacher guidance and supervision, the whole process will result in low efficiency or even fall into disorder.

Learner autonomy has become a topic of interest and discussion over the last two decades and also a word for many studies within the context of language learning. Learner autonomy in language learning is nothing new, but in the last twenty years it has had significant influence on English learning, be it English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Learner autonomy in its own field undertakes the outcomes at the university level such as flexibility, adaptation, self- initiative and self- direction. About the issue of learner autonomy much has been claimed and said that learner autonomy promotes democratic education societies, prepares individuals for a lifelong learning process, it is a human right and makes the best opportunity for learners to use their creative ideas in and out of the classroom.

One of the key principles of learner autonomy is moving the focus from teaching to learning; taking the teacher out of his spotlight and point it at the learners. This may seem not very possible to new teachers or indeed experienced teachers who have been the centre of attention and in control of their classroom. But as David Little wrote:

“I believe that all truly effective learning entails the growth of autonomy in the learner as regards both the process and the content of learning; but I also believe that for most learners the growth of autonomy requires the stimulus, insight and guidance of a good teacher” (Little, 2000, pp. 4-7).

Learner autonomy also means to give the learner a choice for creativity for both input and output.

2. Theoretical background

Now exists a large literature about learner autonomy, which is commonly important to this field and each can provide a very good comprehensive study of the issues of learner autonomy, giving key points, analysis and results.

For a definition of autonomy, we might quote Holec (1981: 3, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 1) who describes it as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning'. On a general note, the term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 2):

- for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
- for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

It is noteworthy that autonomy can be thought of in terms of a departure from education as a social process, as well as in terms of redistribution of power attending the construction of knowledge and the roles of the participants in the learning process. The relevant literature is riddled with innumerable definitions of autonomy and other synonyms for it, such as independence, language awareness, self-direction, andragogy, etc., which testifies to the importance attached to it by scholars. Let us review some of these definitions and try to gain insights into what learner autonomy means and consists of. As has been intimated so far, the term autonomy has sparked considerable controversy, in as much as linguists and teachers have failed to reach a consensus as to what autonomy really is. For example, in David Little's terms, learner autonomy is 'essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning--a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1991: 4). It is not something done to learners; therefore, it is far from being another teaching method (ibid.). In the same vein, Leni Dam (1990, cited in Gathercole, 1990: 16).

- Drawing upon Holec (1983 defines autonomy in terms of the learner's willingness and capacity to control or oversee her own learning. More specifically, she, like Holec, holds that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation.

One element which is important to learner autonomy is student's self- assessment. Students or generally learners should be able to build their own criteria for the quality of their work and also be independent and be able to make judgments for their strong and their weak points of their learning. This usually helps the learners be aware of what is their next step in their learning process, without being helped by the teacher. This means that the teacher is the person with the most experience and knowledge in the classroom, but also results in the increase of level of knowledge and competence.

3. The transformation from teaching to learning process

Moving the focus from teaching to learning clearly doesn't mean that the teacher becomes obsolete or a total boredom. It means a change of pace from where lessons are organized around textbook material and the ground a teacher needs to cover. Lessons can be organized in cooperation with learners for both material and methods.

"The concept of learner autonomy ... emphasizes the role of the learner rather than the role of the teacher. It focuses on the process rather than the product and encourages learners to develop their own purposes for learning and to see learning as a lifelong process" (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001 p.267-299).

Even though that this might seem as a radical change it is not impossible and has been now implemented all over the world. A teacher student in an action research study initiated at the University of Iceland used the theory and methods behind learner autonomy in her teaching practice in a classroom at the lower secondary level of elementary school. She wanted to increase learner autonomy by creating a collaborative learning situation. The learners were given opportunities to choose and take responsibility for their own learning. They chose topics, working approaches and formed their own groups. The learners organized themselves, decided upon homework and did final presentations. The teacher student's role was that of a facilitator. Assessment was partly peer and self-assessment (Lefever, 2005).

At the beginning, learners' reactions ranged from enthusiasm to displeasure, but according to the teacher student, the results of the experience were positive for most of the learners. The learners came to the conclusion that even though they were responsible for their own learning, the teacher also shared a part of the responsibility.

They found that they paid more attention to presentations because they were given the responsibility of giving feedback to their peers (Lefever, 2005). By moving the focus from teacher to learners the learners got motivated and involved in their own learning and what was going on in the classroom. To fully understand the concept of autonomy and its focus on learning rather than teaching, we must take a closer look at what is entailed in both the learner's and teacher's roles. We will then shed light on what characterizes the autonomous classroom.

4. Learner's role and teacher's role

The student's role in a community or a classroom should not be that of a passive learner, as Dam characterized learner autonomy by "a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes". Autonomous learners are those who understand why they are learning specific topics, accept responsibility for their learning, take the initiative in planning and executing learning activities and are willing to assess their own learning (Little, 2002). Learners' active participation in and responsibility for their own learning process are essential in the

field of foreign language learning (Dam, 1995). The learner needs to be willing to “act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person” (Dam, 1995 p.18-37).

The learner’s role in an autonomous environment is not that of a passive receiver of information. Learners are the makers of their own fortune and valued members of a learning community that is their class. Autonomous learners have the ability and willingness to learn on their own. Learners become successful if they take responsibility for their own learning. It is up to learners if they want to learn (Lowes & Target, 1999)!

An important element to learner autonomy is self-assessment. Learners need to build up their own personal criteria for the quality of their work and develop independence from the teacher as the sole judge of their weaknesses and strengths. This helps the learners make informed decisions about their next steps in the learning process and removes the dependence on the teacher. They do not have to wait for him to tell them what to do next and how well they are doing. Even though the teacher remains the more knowledgeable and experienced person in the classroom, the goal is for learners to increase their knowledge and level of competence.

The teacher’s role in an autonomous learning classroom is to provide the learners with the skills and ability to practice what they have learned no matter if we talk about a language classroom or any other course. As Dam says:

“Let me first of all mention the fact that learners do not necessarily learn what we believe ourselves to be teaching... What we can do is give our learners an awareness of how they think and how they learn – an awareness which hopefully will help them come to an understanding of themselves and thus increase their self-esteem” (Dam, 2000, p. 18).

A big part of implementing autonomy in the classroom is to teach diverse learning strategies, and assist the learners in finding the methods that best suit them. Many researchers and scholars who deal with learner autonomy have suggested a few ways or methods which teachers should use or implement during teaching. Some which are more common are logbooks, where teachers keep track of their student’s progress on the activities, a few minutes task, use posters or other routines used in class, which have shown good results everywhere. All these tools should make learners become more self-sufficient and independent in the learning process. Every system of education should seek clearly and make sure to use learner autonomy, being that a part of language learning or other, the material which should be dealt during the time of study.

In an autonomous classroom, teachers do not play the role of imparters of information or sources of facts. Their role is more that of a facilitator. The teacher’s position is to manage the activities in the classroom and help learners plan their learning both for long and short term. The teacher has to be able to establish a close collaboration with the learners and make sure that all learners know what is expected of them at all times (Lowes & Target, 1999).

Teachers have the role of counsellors. They need to inform learners and make them capable of choosing the best learning strategies. Learners have to be able to make informed choices. This means knowing the rationale behind the strategies and having time to experiment to find which suits best for each occasion. Teachers must, however, be careful not to guide the learners implicitly to the strategies they themselves prefer (Nunan, 2003).

A learner autonomous classroom is a place where learners and teachers have constructive interaction with each other and learn from each other. The teacher is responsible for helping learners become aware of alternative strategies and learning styles (Camilleri, 1999).

The teacher gives praise and feedback but this is also supplied by the other learners when group work and product is jointly assessed after projects are finished. Learners then get more personal feedback and guidance from the teacher through the logbooks which serve as a medium of communication as well as a tool of organization and reflection.

A teacher that intends to foster his learners’ autonomy should not only introduce various learning strategies but also give his learners ample opportunity to try them out in different circumstances. It is necessary to build up an atmosphere in the classroom that invites such experiments and lets learners feel comfortable sharing their findings with their teacher and their classmates. Interaction in the classroom directly influences the learners’ learning processes.

5. Conclusion

It is not normally an easy process to make the students become masters of their autonomous learning. The students and the teacher must shift their roles so it can be created a positive learning atmosphere. The teacher must believe in the students, respect them and create suitable education, making the class a one of discussion equally and cooperate friendly. The students should act as the role of centre, under the guidance of autonomous learning theory. Learners can study actively under the teacher's good instructions. Only when the students enrich themselves and their knowledge, can reach higher efficiency of autonomous learning.

Diverse assessment methods cater to the needs of diverse groups of learners. But a good place to start to introduce learners to the idea of thinking about learning. It supplies different ways of getting learners to become aware of their learning process.

There are a lot of factors which need to come together in order for learner autonomy to thrive. In our country although learners are open to more modern and active methods, the official educational policies discourage the move towards autonomy and promote more traditional methods. In other European countries, however, official educational policies encourage the implementation of learner autonomy, but teachers tend to be more conservative and stick to methods they are familiar with. It is our belief that learners all over the world have the same capacity to embrace modern, communicative and autonomous methods despite different cultural differences. The main change that needs to be made for learner autonomy to be implemented is a change of disposition. The whole idea of teaching and learning needs to be revisited and reoriented. In the learner autonomous classroom teachers let go and learners take responsibility for their own learning and realize it is up to them if they want to learn and in what way. There should be no teacher who can make their students learn by threat, or force at least by using those methods they will not be successful and show no results in any way.

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